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ABSTRACT

The workshop examines testing approaches for use with bilingual or limited English speaking students in determining eligibility and need for special services. The workshop covers the following areas: (1) an overall process for deciding whether a student may be in need of special services; (2) ways to alleviate or avoid problems which may impact on obtaining accurate measures when testing limited English proficient students; (3) the types of tests appropriate for these students including psychometric considerations and associated test limitations; and (4) various other types of information needed to supplement test results. The overall process consists of seven steps including determining the student's oral language proficiency in English, determining the student's dominant language, and determining the student's level of functioning in the dominant language. Testing problems possibly encountered include the lack of qualified personnel able to assess the student in his dominant language, the lack of personnel familiar with the student's culture, and student unresponsiveness during assessment. Types of tests include language dominance tests, criterion-referenced checklists, and learning disability screening devices. Other information needed can involve existing records, questionnaires, interviews, and observations. (DB)

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TESTING APPROACHES AND USES WITH BILINGUAL, SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

Presented at the CEC Annual Conference, March, 1988

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OVERVIEW

Bilingual, special needs students present a specific testing problem for project staff. These students bring not only a limited English language proficiency to the testing situation, but also confound the problem as a result of any special needs that may exist. The questions asked about this type of student typically revolve around the issues of whether a student is limited English proficient, special needs, or both; and, what type of program would provide the most suitable placement.

During the course of a school year most students face an ongoing series of tests. Bilingual, special needs students possibly receive even more testing than the typical student. These students are tested as they enter a school district to determine the most appropriate placement. Then, at entry into a program, these students are tested to determine the appropriate placement within the instructional sequences offered in the program. Students are tested at periodic points during the program in order to determine whether they can be successfully mainstreamed out of the bilingual program. Additionally, in order to determine overall program and school effectiveness, students generally take some kind of annual standardized tests required at the program, school and district level. A wealth of data is collected and often misinterpreted and thus, misused.

The state of the art in testing at this time does not provide a definitive answer as to whether certain students are best served by bilingual or special needs programs. However, understanding the different types of tests, along with how their scores can be used, will result in more accurate assessments of students and a more appropriate use of resulting data. Because testing is not at the point where the results can provide definitive answers regarding how best to serve students, it is also important to understand the types of information which should be collected in order to supplement test results and which allow those making decisions to place these results in the proper perspective.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE WORKSHOP

The overall goal of this workshop is to discuss how to most appropriately deal with limited-English proficient students who may require special services. Upon completion of this workshop, participants should be able to:

(1) describe an overall process for deciding whether a student may be in need of special services;

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(2) discuss problems which may occur when testing limited English proficient students who may be in need of special services and how to avoid or, at least alleviate, their impact on obtaining an accurate measure of student performance;

(3) identify the types of tests which may be used to help determine whether a student is in need of special services, including basic pyschometric considerations and associated limitations of the tests; and

(4) identify the various types of information which should be collected in order to supplement test results.

It is anticipated that participants will be able to apply this information in their particular setting to ensure that limited English proficient students who may be in need of special services are provided with appropriate assessment procedures.

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(1) AN OVERALL PROCESS FOR DETERMINING WHETHER A STUDENT MAY BE IN NEED OF SPECIAL SERVICES

You are the project manager for a program which provides services to students who fall into the category of limited-English proficiency. A student has come to your attention as possibly requiring special services. What steps should be taken in order to determine whether this student may fall into the category of limited English proficient, special needs?

RECOMMENDATIONS: While the following recommendations are presented as seven separate points, keep in mind that some of the information required may already exist. Additionally, depending upon the particular situation, these recommendations may be followed in an order different from that presented here.

OBTAIN BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE STUDENT. In order to made decisions regarding the most appropriate placement for any student, it is necessary to find out as much background information as possible. This information can often help explain why a student is having problems in school and is also critical background for correctly interpreting test and other performance data. At a minimum, the following types of information should be collected:

A. Educational Background

- o level of schooling in native country and U.S.
- o existing test scores and other school records (e.g., grades, teacher comments, progress records)
- o descriptive information on the school system attended in the native country

B. Descriptive Information - Student

- o length of time student has been in the U.S.
- o whether the student has experienced any recent problems (e.g., illness in the family, sudden changes in economic status, separation from close family members)
- o health history, with special emphasis on past physical problems
- o types of interactive and social skills demonstrated at school, at home and in the community
- o levels of adaptive ability demonstrated in school, at home, and in the community (e.g., levels of self-sufficiency in going from one place to another in the community, participation in chores at home)

C. Descriptive Information - Home, Community, Native Country

- o primary language spoken at home
- o primary language spoken in the community
- o educational history and status of other children in the home
- o descriptive information regarding the student's native culture and school system

This information should be added to the student's permanent records and used both to gain a better understanding of the student's actual background and experiences, as well as to help interpret various test scores.

DETERMINE THE STUDENT'S ORAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH. The student's level of functioning in regard to oral English should be determined for two important reasons. First, this information will provide baseline information regarding whether certain types of assessment activities can or cannot be conducted in English. This includes both testing and interviews which may occur during the course of a complete assessment process.

Second, if the student is presently in a school program which requires a working knowledge of oral English, the placement itself may be a contributing factor in regard to low performance. If the student does not have the oral English skills necessary for functioning in the present placement, this may be reflected as low overall school performance by the student. If there appears to be a discrepancy between the student's level of oral English and that required in the program, then the student's placement needs to be reconsidered.

When assessing the student's level of oral English, it is very important to differentiate between the use of language for interpersonal communication purposes and for school learning activities. While a student may appear to have a good command of oral English, a thorough assessment may indicate that the student has not mastered enough English to use the language successfully for instructional purposes.

DETERMINE THE STUDENT'S DOMINANT LANGUAGE. In order to conduct the types of activities required to determine appropriate placement, it is necessary to conduct many of the testing procedures in the student's native language.

But, in some cases the student's native language may not necessarily be the dominant language. Dominant language, therefore, should be determined through a formal assessment procedure.

DETERMINE THE STUDENT'S LEVEL OF FUNCTIONING IN THE DOMINANT LANGUAGE. In order to get a complete picture of the student's present level of functioning, it is necessary to determine how well the student can function in the dominant language, including use of both oral and written language. Be sure that the methods for assessing the dominant language take into account both the use of language for interpersonal communication purposes and for school learning activities.

IF THE STUDENT'S DOMINANT LANGUAGE FUNCTIONING IS LOW AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION INDICATES THAT THE STUDENT HAS HAD OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT THROUGH APPROPRIATE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, RECOMMEND THE STUDENT FOR FURTHER SCREENING PROCEDURES. Keep in mind that any formal testing procedures conducted in regard to placing students in special education programs should follow the guidelines of PL 94-142, as well as any procedures endorsed at the local school district level.

IF THE DOMINANT LANGUAGE FUNCTIONING IS ADEQUATE, TEST THE STUDENT IN ACADEMIC AREAS (READING, LANGUAGE ARTS, WRITING, SUBJECT MATTER AREAS) USING TESTS ADMINISTERED IN THAT LANGUAGE. The purpose of this testing is to get an accurate picture of the student's academic levels. Testing in the dominant language removes the barrier that will exist when testing is conducted in a language that the student has not fully mastered. If the scores fall in a range close to what would be expected given the student's level of schooling in the native country, then special education services are most likely not required.

When interpreting these test results it is extremely important to take into account the past educational history, such as interrupted education, very limited educational opportunities in the native country, and so forth. In some cases the student may have learned as much as possible given the opportunities available. Low scores, in this type of situation, may be more a reflection of lack of opportunities rather than capabilities.

IF THE STUDENT SCORES LOW IN THE ACADEMIC AREAS OR IN REGARD TO USE OF THE DOMINANT LANGUAGE AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION INDICATES THAT THE STUDENT HAS HAD OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT THROUGH APPROPRIATE SCHOOLING, RECOMMEND THE STUDENT FOR FURTHER SCREENING. Again, if this additional screening is being done in regard to placement in special programs, the procedures must adhere to all federal, state and local requirements and laws.

If, after any of these steps are taken and you feel that the student may benefit from further assessments, this should be done by an individual qualified to test children in regard to special needs. However, you should take the responsibility for ensuring that all testing procedures are conducted in a manner that is fair for that student. The best possible situation is when tests are available in the student's dominant language and the person doing the assessments both speaks that language and has a working knowledge of the student's culture and background.

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(2) PROBLEMS WHICH MAY OCCUR DURING TESTING

One of the most difficult aspects of implementing these procedures is the lack of tests in different languages. If there are no tests available for assessing the student in the dominant language, consider using translations of the tests or interpreters during the testing procedures. Either of these approaches should be taken with extreme caution -- they can create as many problems as they may solve. For example, translations can often distort the meaning of questions and answers, making them impossible to answer correctly. Interpreters may also inadvertently change the meaning of test items, or through voice inflection give cues and hints to the student. If either of these two approaches are taken, the process should be carefully monitored.

Keep in mind that once a test has been translated into another language or administered with the assistance of an interpreter, the test norms can no longer be used for interpreting the test results. (In order for test norms to be used, the test must be administered in the manner described by the test developer.)

There are also some problems which may occur when testing a limited-English proficient student in order to determine whether special services should be provided and which can result in the student scoring artificially low. When problems occur during the testing process, the result will not provide an accurate reflection of the student's present level of functioning or future needs. Some of these problems and ways to avoid them are as follows:

What If: Assessment procedures have been conducted primarily in English rather than the student's dominant language?

Then: The results should be viewed with skepticism. The student should be re-assessed in the dominant language.

What If: No qualified personnel are available to assess the student in the dominant language.

Then: A trained interpreter should work with those conducting the assessment activities.

What If: The necessary tests are not available in the student's dominant language.

Then: Use a trained translator to interpret the necessary information or use tests which have been translated. If the latter approach is taken, be sure that any translations have been reviewed for accuracy and content integrity. Keep in mind that if either of these approaches are used, the norms should not be used when interpreting the test results.

What If: Qualified personnel are available to administer the test, but are not familiar with the student's culture and background.

Then: Provide the person conducting the testing with a briefing regarding both the student's background and culture. After testing, review the results together to ensure that conclusions and recommendations are in view of this information about the student.

What If: The student is unresponsive during assessment procedures or appears nervous during the process.

Then: If possible, terminate the procedures and reschedule. Prior to any further assessments, be sure to explain the purpose of the activities (in the student's dominant language) and the overall process to the student in a way that is non-threatening in nature. As with any other assessment procedures, prior to beginning a session, adequate time should be spent putting the student at ease. Again, be sure that any cultural differences are taken into consideration when the results are interpreted.

What If: A student is being recommended for screening regarding the possible need for special services based on test results conducted both in English and the dominant language.

Then: Be sure that the necessary descriptive and background information are collected and taken into consideration prior to any final decisions being made.

While those who work in the field of bilingual education are very aware that cultural differences may affect how a student responds in a testing situation, sometimes those who conduct assessment activities overlook this issue or simply are not provided with the necessary information about the student's background. Those responsible for working with the student should ensure that these differences are considered both during the testing process and afterwards, when the results are interpreted. For example, the student may not be familiar with timed tests; may not be openly verbal with adults; may avoid eye contact with adults; may be unfamiliar with the objects or contents of various test items; or simply may not be motivated to perform to his or her best level. All of these issues, related to differences in culture, may result in artificially low test scores. Awareness of these issues, as well as understanding the need to carefully review each student's background, will help ensure that appropriate services are provided.

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(3) TYPES OF TESTS, APPROPRIATE USES, PSYCHOMETRIC CHARACTERISTICS, AND LIMITATIONS

In order to understand how tests can be used with limited-English proficient students who may be in need of special services, it is necessary to understand the various types of assessment devices available, the types of information which each can provide and the associated limitations to the resulting data. Some commonly used tests and other assessment devices which

are often used to collect information on limited English proficient students who may benefit from special services include: oral language proficiency tests, language dominance tests, standardized achievement tests, placement/diagnostic tests, criterion-referenced skills tests and learning disability screening tests.

1. Oral Language Proficiency Tests.

Oral language proficiency tests are used to determine how well a student is functioning in regard to a specific spoken language. Depending on the particular language acquisition model followed by the test developers, these tests may measure comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, or functional uses of language. Most oral language proficiency tests were designed to be used as screening devices, to help determine if students belong in bilingual, ESL, or other special language programs. Others were designed to provide information concerning areas of strengths and weaknesses in language skills. In a few cases these tests can be used for placement and as gross indicators of growth.

However, care should be taken when using oral language proficiency tests for measuring individual growth or for making specific decisions regarding student needs. Because most tests of this type have been developed to place students into gross categories of language proficiency, they generally are not sensitive enough to measure individual growth. Additionally, when using a specific oral language proficiency test, keep in mind the reliability and validity of the instrument, as well as the composition and size of the group on which the instrument was field-tested.

2. Language Dominance Tests.

Language dominance tests are used to make a comparison between a student's language ability in English and his/her native language. The language in which a student shows the greater ability is identified as the student's dominant language. Several cautions should be taken when using language dominance tests. Since dominance in one aspect of language (e.g. proficiency in the classroom) does not imply dominance in another (e.g. interpersonal communication), it is important to assess language dominance in a variety of contexts.

Also, when language dominance is determined, it is often based on a comparison of scores in English and the native language (relative language proficiency). This could be an inappropriate performance standard to use, particularly for students whose scores indicate limited proficiency in both languages or whose scores are very close together. As a practical tool language dominance tests can provide some information as to how testing activities should proceed, but should be used with caution. As with oral language proficiency tests, the test results should be interpreted in view of the reliability, validity and field-test group of the particular instrument.

3. Standardized Achievement Tests.

Standardized achievement tests are designed to sample a student's current level of learning across a range of general skills areas, such as mathematics, reading, language arts, social studies, science or other subjects. These tests generally cover a wide range of skill areas typically taught at specific grade levels. Publishers of standardized achievement tests also develop a set of norms for interpreting student scores. These norms indicate how "typical" students at various age or grade levels perform on given test levels. (Test norms are generally developed by administering various levels of the test to large groups of students selected in such a way such that they represent a certain population or group of interest. Most standardized achievement tests are "normed" on groups of students selected to match the general school age population. However, some standardized achievement tests are normed on very specific types of students, such as certain language groups.)

The resulting scores from a standardized achievement test generally provide an indication as to where a particular student stands in relation to other students of the same age or grade level, represented by the test norms. Standardized achievement tests are also frequently used to obtain a picture of student's growth over time in a particular content area. In this case, pretest and posttest scores are used to determine how much growth has occurred over time. Growth for a particular student can then be compared to growth shown by students in the norming group in order to determine whether the student is keeping up with or falling behind peers.

Standardized achievement tests can provide a good indication of a student's academic status in comparison to what would be expected for that age or grade level. Since most standardized achievement tests undergo rigorous field-testing and revision activities, reliability and validity is generally good. However, most standardized achievement tests are not readily available in a variety of languages. So, if the student does not have the English-language skills necessary to take the test, the results may not be particularly useful. In these cases, the resulting test scores will be more a reflection of guessing rather than a measure of the student's level of academic achievement.

Due to the lack of availability of standardized achievement tests in a variety of languages, one often seen approach is to use a test which has been translated into another language or to use an interpreter during administration of the test. As mentioned earlier, these approaches have certain pitfalls. However, the use of translated or interpreted tests, if done carefully, can provide some useful information regarding a student's level of academic performance.

4. Placement/Diagnostic Tests.

Placement/diagnostic tests are used primarily to identify what a student's strengths and weaknesses are in specific content areas and how best to help the student overcome any particular limitations. Rather than assessing a wide variety of areas, these tests generally measure a well-defined skill area in depth. In this manner, the results of a placement/diagnostic tests can be used as a way to identify what a student needs to learn and how best to teach those particular areas.

As with achievement tests, placement/diagnostic tests generally provide norms which indicate how students at a similar grade or age level performed on the test. Using these test norms, student performance can be compared to the "typical" performance for a student of the same grade or age level in order to determine the specific skills that should be taught and the level of instruction for which the student is ready. However, keep in many that most placement/diagnostic tests are normed using groups of students selected to match the general school age population. Care should be taken in regard to using the test norms when interpreting individual scores for limited English proficient students.

Placement/diagnostic tests can provide valuable information regarding a student's level of performance, strengths and instructional needs in the area being assessed. As with standardized achievement tests, placement/diagnostic tests generally undergo extensive field-testing activities, thus ensuring good reliability and validity. But, again there is the problem of a lack of availability in many languages. If the test is administered in English, it is necessary to ensure that the student has the basic language skills necessary to take the test in a meaningful way. If a placement/diagnostic test is administered through the use of an interpreter or a translated version, then all the cautions discussed previously regarding these approaches should be kept in mind.

5. Criterion-Referenced Skills Checklists.

Criterion-referenced skills checklists are used to determine a student's strengths and weaknesses without comparing that student to anyone else. The purpose of a criterion-referenced skills checklist is to systematically document the specific skills a student does and does not have, usually in the context of mastery of specific objectives. These checklists, unlike achievement or placement/diagnostic tests, generally do not undergo extensive development, so the issues of reliability, validity and norming procedures are not a consideration in interpreting or using the results. Often these checklists are linked directly to published curricula in a content area. Because the particular skills included differ from one checklist to the next, it is important that the results be interpreted in relation only to mastery or non-mastery of the behaviors measured.

Criterion-referenced checklists, however, are a very good way to systematically determine what skills a student has or has not mastered. This type of information can point directly to specific instructional needs or areas which may require further testing. Additionally, information of this type can help clarify why a student is having difficulty in certain areas. For example, it may become apparent that the student has not yet learned basic skills required in order to learn the more difficult tasks which are presently causing difficulty in school. Similarly, the results of a checklist may indicate a pattern in regard to the types of skills not yet learned -- a pattern which might point to specific non-language related learning difficulties.

A major advantage to criterion-referenced checklists is that they need not be administered in any one particular language, but rather in the language most appropriate to the skills being measured. For example, a checklist which focuses on reading readiness skills might include a series of activities

requiring the student to complete certain tasks using directions given in the dominant language (e.g., put the block on top of the table; raise your right hand). A checklist covering skills in mathematics could, in a similar manner, have the student complete certain math related tasks, with directions again given in a language which would not interfere with determining whether the student could actually do the task.

On the other hand, unlike achievement or placement/diagnostic tests, most criterion-referenced checklists do not have norms to help interpret the results. Checklist results provide a good picture of what the student can or cannot do, but generally do not provide "norms" to help interpret whether the performance level shown is typical, above, or below what would generally be expected for that type of student. This type of interpretation must be made by individuals who have a good understanding of that age student, as well as in view of the particular student's educational and cultural background.

6. Learning Disability Screening Devices.

Learning disability screening devices are used primarily to assess development and to identify students who may have learning problems and thus should be provided with further in-depth assessments. These devices are used for screening populations of students to identify those with handicaps or those who are, in some sense, at risk. One major caution when using learning disability screening devices concerns the problem of definitions. The classification of "learning disabled" varies from one instrument to the next, so these devices are best used to make initial judgments only, to indicate a need for further testing.

Learning disability devices can be invaluable in helping determine whether a student is having difficulties learning because of a limited level of English proficiency or for other reasons. However, these devices range along a continuum from quick screening to in-depth assessment procedures. While some quick screening devices can be administered without special training and may provide information which can help in understanding why a student is having difficulty in some areas, no decisions should be made solely on the basis of these types of results. Screening procedures that assess needs and problem areas in depth should be administered and interpreted by individuals with the requisite skills.

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(4) OTHER INFORMATION WHICH SHOULD BE COLLECTED TO SUPPLEMENT TEST RESULTS

While the wide array of tests which exist can provide very valuable information regarding a student's status and instructional needs, test results alone are not sufficient information on which to base critical decisions. In order to make sound decisions regarding the types of services which are most appropriate for meeting a student's instructional needs, it is necessary to collect a variety of types of descriptive information. This descriptive information can provide insight into why a student is experiencing certain problems and also help place actual test results in a context which takes into account the student's background and experiences.

This additional information is most often collected using a variety of approaches, including existing records, questionnaires, interviews and observations. These four approaches can be used to collect much of the information outlined in the recommendation covering background information on the student and can also be used to obtain other data which can be helpful when making decisions regarding student placement or services.

Existing Records. Existing records do not have to be collected from scratch, but rather are compiled from pre-existing sources. Generally, existing records are a by-product of some other school-related activity or documentation conducted by another organization. Types of existing records that can supplement test results include student grades, teacher comments, logs kept by project staff, attendance rates, referrals for discipline problems, parental attendance at school activities, participation in extra-curricula or community activities, school health screening activities, or any other existing documentation which can help round out the picture about a student. Outside health agencies and organizations which have had contact with the student in some way may also have records which can be helpful (e.g., documentation regarding family or individual health problems; descriptive information regarding experiences the student underwent during transition to the U.S.). While it may be time-consuming to locate and summarize existing records, they may provide some otherwise unavailable information about the student.

Questionnaires. The questionnaire is a frequently used method for collecting information to supplement test results, including facts, attitudes and opinions. Questionnaires, if well-developed, have the advantages of being inexpensive to administer, are suitable for collecting a wide range of information in a fairly objective manner, and can be summarized using fairly straightforward procedures. The kind of information that can be collected using questionnaires include as many diverse areas as can reasonably be addressed using written questions, such as: descriptive and background information about the student and family; information regarding the student's native country, including such areas as culture and types of educational institutions; health-related information; behavioral patterns, problem areas, learning difficulties and strengths as seen by other teachers who have worked with a particular student; or attitudes and concerns of the student's family.

Interviews. Interviews are another useful way to supplement test results, especially for topics that may require more in-depth follow-up and probing to obtain complete responses. Interviews are an especially good approach when the respondents may have difficulty reading a questionnaire or where the cultural background of the respondent could cause some misunderstanding of the questions. Parents and others who interact with the student on a frequent basis in situations outside of the school setting can help clarify background information, help establish whether problems really exist and if so, provide more detailed information regarding key areas. Interviews with the student should not be overlooked as another valuable source of information. Teachers and aides can be interviewed to establish how a particular student is presently functioning in other classes and to identify particular instructional needs or problems that have occurred.

Observations. Observations are a good approach for collecting information that probably would not be available through other techniques, such as how well the student interacts on a social basis with peers, whether the student can easily adapt his or her behavior to meet changing situations, or simply whether the student can complete specified tasks. Observations have the advantages of not relying on memory of past events and, because certain actions are observed, may be more objective in nature. On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that observations are time-consuming and to result in usable information, must be carefully and systematically conducted, as well as the results carefully summarized. In order to obtain useful information, the observation procedures have to be carefully developed, the observers trained, the observations conducted and the data properly analyzed. But, observations are the one best way to clearly determine what a student can and cannot do in regard to specified skills or how the student will respond in certain types of situations.